Aristotle's *Republic* or, Why Aristotle's Ethics Is Not Virtue Ethics

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Aristotle's ethical thought, and in particular the *Nicomachean Ethics*, now enjoys a favoured status amongst many modern moral philosophers. The reason for this is that it is seen as a seminal text of a widely-favoured modern view: 'virtue ethics'. This term names an ethical viewpoint which is commonly defined by distinguishing it from two alternative views, (Kantian) deontology and consequentialism. The differences are typically spelt out along two dimensions. The first is a shift away from a focus on acts—from what is or is not to be done—to a focus on the character of agents—to what it is good to be. The second is related, a shift away from legalistic conceptions of ethics, from 'the morality system' with its focus on *obligation*. These aspects are neatly summed up by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote in their introduction to their recent collection. Virtue ethics, they say,

> makes essential reference to the rationality of virtue itself. Thus, for example, the real reason why I should not lie to you is not that it is against the moral law, nor that it is likely not to maximize well-being, but because it is *dishonest*. The notions of virtue, then, are more basic than the notions at the heart of utilitarian and Kantian theory. They may even replace some of these notions, including perhaps 'obligation' itself. The virtue ethicist at least does not *need* such language. Certainly, it is characteristic of modern virtue ethics that it puts primary emphasis on aretaic or virtue-centred concepts rather than deontic or obligation-centred concepts.[1]

This is to define virtue ethics in fairly strong terms, as an *alternative* to Kantian and utilitarian views. Concern for virtues is also sometimes presented as a way of *augmenting* one or other of the two main ethical theories of actions and rules. One way of motivating

[1] Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (ed.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2–3.

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this weaker form is to question whether the contrast drawn by Crisp and Slote is more apparent than real; whether the shift in focus from obligations to virtues is *no more than* a shift in focus, leaving underlying structures untouched. For, to stick to the example given, why should being dishonest matter unless dishonesty is wrong? And why is dishonesty wrong except that it is wrong to lie? So wherein lies the crucial difference between concern for such virtues and vices, and more familiar forms of ethics, deontologically conceived? Is the issue not better understood in terms of the necessity of making moral concerns part of the concerns of the moral agent, such that concern for avoiding dishonesty becomes a *support* for avoiding lying? If this line of thought is followed, then there is no separate alternative to deontology or consequentialism called 'virtue ethics': there is, rather, the theory of moral right and supporting issues of moral psychology and moral education.

This line of thought could then take heart from the fact that—unlike so much of the moral philosophy of the twentieth century—most influential moral theories have not neglected the virtues, but have included them in the manner suggested. This is true even in the case of Kant: his well-known suspicions concerning 'inclinations'—stemming from his non-cognitive account of the passions—do not stop him from offering a theory of virtue in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, nor do they prevent him from recognizing that sympathetic inclinations provide support for rational virtue.[2] Similarly, most of the major utilitarian thinkers—Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick—accord an important role to the virtues.[3] In more recent times, some notable utilitarians have held not only that utilitarianism is compatible with the cultivation of virtue, but even that the justification of utilitarianism lies precisely in its being founded on the benevolent attitude.[4] For all these

[2] Martha Nussbaum, 'Virtue Ethics', *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999), 165.

[3] Nussbaum, 'Virtue Ethics', 165–7.

[4] The best modern example is J. J. C. Smart, who argues in his 'An Outline of Utilitarianism' that it was precisely the connection between benevolence and utilitarianism that led him to embrace the theory. See J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism, For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 67–8. Most forms of 'ideal observer' theory embody the same thought, being founded on the impartial responses of the benevolent spectator. Indeed, *all* forms of 'ideal observer' theory will manifest the general principle, since all will characterize the observer in terms of *some* virtue or virtues. The possession of virtue(s) is a necessary part of the observer's ideality; without them the observer's responses could not be authoritative.

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thinkers, then, virtue is not seen as an alternative to established theories of right action, but an augmentation or completion of such theories. For reasons such as these, some philosophers have been prepared to defend virtue ethics only in the weaker sense.[5] Others have concluded that it is a mistake to think that virtue ethics is a distinct ethical theory; they think that, as suggested above, to be concerned for the virtues is not to be opposed to deontology or consequentialism, but to seek to fill out the theory of right action with an account of good character.[6]

It seems plausible to suppose that a spectrum of views is possible, ranging from a bold version of virtue ethics, conceived as an alternative to deontology and consequentialism, to weaker forms which steadily cease to be alternatives at all—and so better described as theories of moral psychology or moral education, rather than as virtue ethics. This supposition will be followed here: 'virtue ethics' will be taken to be the ethical viewpoint that to focus on the excellences of character of agents is to provide a real alternative to ethics focused abstractly on actions and obligations. It will be taken to have its rise in the central themes of Elizabeth Anscombe's influential article, 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.[7] Anscombe there argues that moral philosophy is unprofitable without an adequate moral psychology, and that the notions of moral duty and moral obligation should be jettisoned, because they are unintelligible outside a law-based conception of ethics, itself unintelligible without recourse to a (divine) lawmaker.[8] Modern virtue ethics is, then, the ambition to provide a psychologically-enriched conception of the moral agent, an enrichment that justifies focusing on the states of the agent rather than on what he or she does or should do, and that this focus renders obligation—and, more generally, law conceptions of ethics—thoroughly surplus to requirements.[9]

It is for just these reasons that Aristotle's ethical writings—and in particular, the *Nicomachean Ethics*—enjoy iconic status in the movement. As Crisp and Slote observe,

[5] For example, James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd edn. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999), ch. 13, distinguishes strong and weak forms of virtue ethics, and defends the latter, augmenting, version.

[6] Nussbaum, 'Virtue Ethics', 163–5.

[7] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958). Reprinted in Crisp and Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, 26–44.

[8] *Virtue Ethics*, 26–31.

[9] The ambition to overcome law conceptions is sufficiently indicated by the title of Slote's own contribution to virtue ethics: *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

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> Aristotle ... has been the main source of inspiration for modern virtue ethicists. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, argued that the best life for a human being—*eudaimonia*—consists in the exercise of the virtues (or the 'excellences'). Indeed his is perhaps the most radical virtue ethics ever, since he can be understood to be saying that there is *nothing* worth having in life except the exercise of the virtues.[10]

The burden of this paper is that this is to get Aristotle seriously wrong, and that taking the time to provide a more adequate account of his purposes both helps to clarify the view he *does* offer and helps to show that, whatever its other qualities, modern virtue ethics is enmeshed in a false set of disjunctions.

To hold that Aristotle has been seriously misconstrued is not, of course, to deny that the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a detailed account of the virtues, or that that account implies the work to be more focused on the agent than on actions. Neither is it to deny that that account is intended to make up for the deficiencies of a pure law conception of ethics. It is the *disjunctions* that are misconceived. Aristotle's focus on the virtues is not *instead of* a focus on law: law takes its place within his theory, and as something obligatory in the good life. His focus on the agent is not *instead of* a focus on actions. And his aim is indeed to make up for the deficiencies of a law conception of ethics—but by augmenting it, not by replacing it. Aristotle's ethics is, in fact, a law conception of ethics, even if not in quite the way that Anscombe had in mind. Seeing why this is so will, I suggest, take some of the wind out of the sails of modern virtue ethics. Moreover, by bringing out the role of the virtues in Aristotle's account, it will show that the weakest form of virtue theory (i.e. as a psychological or educational theory) is compatible with Aristotle's account, but that its central motivation is quite different from his own. Aristotle's antiquity makes a real difference.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is, as everyone knows, an enquiry into the nature of the human good, and this in turn is to be understood as an enquiry into the nature and conditions of human happiness or flourishing, of *eudaimonia*. But how is the enquiry itself to be described? Aristotle's answer is this:

> Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science. And this is obviously the science of politics [*he politike*], because it lays down which of the sciences there should be in cities, and which each class of person should learn and up to what level ... Since

[10] *Virtue Ethics*, 2.

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> political science employs the other sciences, and also lays down laws about what we should do and refrain from, its end will include the ends of the others, and will therefore be the human good. For even if the good is the same for an individual as for a city, that of the city is obviously a greater and more complete thing to obtain and preserve. For while the good of an individual is a desirable thing, what is good for people or for cities is a nobler and more godlike thing. Our enquiry, then, is a kind of political science, since these are the ends it is aiming at.[11]

This answer must come as a surprise. For we here see the hero of modern virtue ethics arguing that to enquire into the human good is to enquire into 'laws about what we should do and refrain from', into how to legislate for humanity.

This does not mean, of course, that virtues of character are not a central concern of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But the place they occupy in Aristotle's enquiry into the good for human beings is not as virtue ethics would have us believe. He is, in fact, explicit that the virtues of character find their proper expression in good actions—that is, I take it, in good actions *independently conceived*[12]—and their proper home within a framework of laws:

> the person who is to be good must be nobly brought up and habituated, and then spend his life engaged in good pursuits and do nothing bad whether involuntarily or voluntarily. And this would happen when people lived in accordance with a kind of intellect and a correct system with power over them.[13]

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. & ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), I.2 (1094a–b). (Hereafter cited as *EN*.)

[12] To take one example: no reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* could be in any doubt that Aristotle thinks adultery to be wicked and disgraceful. But he makes no attempt to show that its wrongness consists in its being contrary to any virtue; it is, rather, simply taken to be wrong, and the man of virtue shown to be virtuous—in part if not in whole—by the fact that he does not do dreadful things of that kind. See e.g. *EN* II.6 (1107a). See also *EN* X.9 (1179b), where the provinces of nature, habit and reason are distinguished. Nature provides human beings with 'a pre-existing character with some affinity for virtue through its fondness for what is noble and dislike of what is disgraceful'. Note also, as Crisp points out in his Glossary (p. 207), that Aristotle's notions of nobility and disgracefulness are aesthetic notions. They thus refer to perceptible qualities—qualities which, presumably, are visible *naturally*, i.e. independently of habituation.

[13] *EN* X.9 (1180a).

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Moreover, to be bound by laws implies no loss of freedom, since rule by law, stemming from practical wisdom, is not oppressive:

> Now the command of a father has no strength or compulsive power, nor in general does that of a single person, unless he is a king or something like that; but law does have compulsive power, and it is reason proceeding from a kind of practical wisdom and from intellect. And people hate a human being who stands in opposition to their impulses, even if he is right to do so; but there is no oppressiveness in the law's prescribing what is good.[14]

Furthermore, the good is best served when each person has a hand in legislating:

> The best thing ... is for there to be correct public concern with [people's upbringing and pursuits]. But if they are neglected in the public sphere, it would seem appropriate for each person to help his own children and friends on the way to virtue, and for them to be able to do this, or at least rationally choose to do so. From what we have said, however, it would seem that he will be better able to do this if he has the chance of legislating, because care at the public level is evidently demonstrated through laws, and good care through good laws ... a person who wishes to improve people, whether many or few, through his concern for them should try to develop a capacity for legislating if it is through laws that we will become good. For producing a noble disposition in just anyone, whoever is put before one, is not a task that just anyone can perform; if it is anyone's task, it is that of the person who knows, just as in the case of medicine and the other sciences that require some kind of care and practical wisdom.[15]

For Aristotle, then, the best life for a human being is to be a legislator for humanity; and, because the good life is lived in company with others, a legislator amongst other legislators. In this best situation, what should one legislate for? In part, one should legislate for those conditions conducive to the development of virtues of character. But the task does not end there: for what one should also legislate for is for the conditions conducive to the development of the capacity of legislating, and of being legislated for, themselves. I will argue below that, for Aristotle, the very worth of developing the virtues of character cannot be detached from the development of this further capacity, because it is this capacity—for the exercise

[14] *EN* X.9 (1180a).
[15] *EN* X.9 (1180a–b).

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of the rational ruling element in the soul—that is the highest and most godlike part of a human being and so the ultimate end at which our actions must properly aim. The moral is plain: far from finding in Aristotle a rationale for a virtue ethic that *substitutes* agents and their lives for actions as the core of moral concern, and virtues of character for rules and obligations, Aristotle in fact offers us a theory almost describable in the key terms of his supposed arch-opponent, Kant, because he almost provides us with an account of the best life for human beings in terms of mutual membership in a 'kingdom of ends'.[16]

Almost, but not quite. What is missing, of course, is the distinctively Kantian thought that the duties of morality are categorical, and that they are so because morality is the recognition and expression of the respect due to all human beings as ends in themselves, a respect which is in its turn due because of the ineliminable freedom of the human will, of practical rationality. Admittedly, even this Kantian emphasis has Aristotelian roots, for it reflects Aristotle's focus on the significance of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and deliberation or rational choice (*prohairesis*) in his account of the praiseworthiness of the virtues. But there is a difference, as can be seen by remembering that not only are there no 'natural slaves' in Kant's ethics: there *cannot* be any. There is, then, a genuine difference between Aristotle and Kant; but it is a difference concerning which even the modern advocates of virtue ethics would find themselves on the Kantian side.

If we attend to this difference for a moment, we can see that it also begins to explain why it is that Aristotle's theory has been so misunderstood; or, to put it less dramatically, so selectively interpreted. For it is Kant's insistence on the over-riding significance of respect for each other as ends that underpins his thought that it is a *moral* truth that human beings possess an 'unsocial sociability',[17]

[16] The scare quotes are necessary because Kant's term (*reich*) is best translated as *realm*, rather than as 'kingdom'. The point is not pedantic, because the very idea of such membership in a community of ends is—as Kant is well aware—a thoroughly republican, rather than monarchical, idea. Cf. Kant's description of this *reich* in the *Groundwork* with Rousseau's account of republicanism in *The Social Contract*, Bk 1. See also 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', where the 'First Definitive Article of Perpetual Peace' is that 'The Civil Constitution of Every State shall be Republican', in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 99.

[17] Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', *Political Writings*, 44.

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and which therefore licenses a *separation* of moral and political domains. For Aristotle, in contrast, no such separation is fully legitimate. Rather, the moral and the political must be regarded as aspects of a single enquiry. This is because, as he puts it, 'the state is a creation of nature, and man is by nature a political animal [*ho anthropos phusei politikon zoon*]'.[18]

The force of this remark needs to be properly appreciated. The point is not that man—that is, all human beings—finds life in political society preferable to solitary existence or to unstructured social life. To hold that man is *by nature* a political being is to hold that the good at which human life aims is that of an organized and ordered social whole. This means, among other things, that human beings *necessarily* desire organized social existence; that they recognize, even if implicitly, that their good cannot be specified independently of relations with others, nor those relations independently of intelligent social rules.[19] To treat of the human and its characteristic good is, therefore, to treat of organized social life, not of distinct individuals. Aristotle puts it this way:

> the state (*polis*) is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part ... The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.[20]

[18] Aristotle, *The Politics*, in *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I (1253a2). (This is Jowett's translation from the Oxford Translation of Aristotle, now in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press/ Bollingen Series LXXI. 2, 1995).)

[19] *Politics* III (1278b16–30). One famous modern statement of this Aristotelian point is Grotius's: 'Man is, to be sure, an animal, but an animal of a superior kind, much farther removed from all other animals than the different kinds of animals are from each other; evidence on this point may be found in the many traits peculiar to the human species. But among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life—not of any and every sort, but peaceful, and organized according to the measure of his intelligence, with those who are of his kind.' Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres*, trans. F. W. Kelsey (New York: Oceana Publications, 1964), Prolegomenon, 6.

[20] *Politics* I (1253a19–29).

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According to Aristotle, then, the question 'How are we to live?' cannot be addressed by considering human beings as distinct from each other. In our terms, it means that it cannot be conceived as an ethical *rather than* a political question. It is indeed, in our sense of the term, an ethical question; but for Aristotle it cannot be answered independently of the question 'What is the best form of human social organization?' Since he wastes no time in telling us, in the opening pages of the *Politics*, that 'man is by nature a political animal', it is obvious that the first and most general answer to the latter question is that the best form of social organization is the *polis*, the self-governing city-state. The task of the *Politics* is, then, to work out what is the best form of the *polis*—and this is to bring to completion the task, begun in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, of describing the good for human beings, of what is the best way for creatures like us to live. So to hold, as Aristotle does, that 'man is by nature a political animal' is to hold that his enquiry into the best life for a human being is begun in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but completed in the *Politics*—that they are, in a sense, a single work.

This conclusion may surprise, but it should not. I do not mean merely that Aristotle's doctrine of our essential political nature implies it; I mean that it should not surprise because he tells us so himself. We have already seen how, at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he tells us that the master enquiry is 'political science'. We now need only note that he concludes that work by informing us that the *Politics* follows on directly, and does so because it will complete the enquiry already begun. After the remarks quoted above, that the best life is the life of legislating for humanity, he asks 'should we not move on, then, to consider where or how one might acquire a capacity for legislation?' His response is that we should:

> presumably collections of laws and political systems might be very useful to people who can study them and judge which are noble, or the contrary, and which suit particular circumstances ... Since, then, our predecessors have left the question of legislation unexamined, it is presumably better that we study it, and the question of political systems in general, so that our philosophy of humanity might be as complete as possible ... when these issues have been considered, we shall perhaps be more likely to see which political system is best, how each must be arranged, and what laws and habits it should employ.[21]

[21] *EN* X.9 (1180b, 1181b).

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Aristotle thus tells us himself that the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* are two parts of a single enquiry.

The *Politics* itself underlines the connection, both by what it affirms and also by what it omits. In the first place, it affirms that its task is not merely descriptive political science, as we would understand the term, but an enquiry into the best form of the state, because this is necessary if we are to answer the question concerning the best life: 'For a state is not a mere aggregate of persons, but ... a union of them sufficing for the purposes of life'; therefore it 'should be framed with a view to the fulfilment of [necessary] functions'; and the most important such function is the 'power of deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men's dealings with each other'.[22] The true form of government is therefore government which has a view to the public interest; all other forms are perversions.[23]

Secondly, because 'man is by nature a political animal', the best man is the same as the ideal citizen in the best state:

> We showed at the commencement of our inquiry that the excellence of the good man is necessarily the same as the excellence of the citizen of the perfect state. Clearly then in the same manner, and by the same means through which a man becomes truly good, he will frame a state ... and the same education and the same habits will be found to make a good man and a man fit to be a statesman and a king.[24]

This is to show, from the side of the *Politics*, that its task and that of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are the same. But the *Politics* also acknowledges that this identity implies a dependence on the findings of the *Ethics*. Since the best form of government must be that form which best enables the state to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*), Aristotle appeals to the general account given of happiness in the *Ethics*.[25]

The connections are also indicated by some omissions. For example, Aristotle observes that

> A city can be excellent only when the citizens who have a share in the government are excellent, and in our state all the citizens share in the government; let us then inquire how a man becomes excellent.[26]

[22] *Politics* VII (1328b15–20, 13–14).
[23] *Politics* III (1279a17–33).
[24] *Politics* III (1288a37–1288b3). Cf. also VII (1333a10–5).
[25] *Politics* VII (1332a3–7).
[26] *Politics* VII (1332a33–6).

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The subsequent 'inquiry' takes up no more than a paragraph, not going beyond some general remarks about the different roles played by nature, habit and reason. If, however, the *Politics* is a continuation of the investigations begun in the *Ethics*, then a brief reminder of some of the latter's central organizing themes would be quite sufficient.

A second, no less striking, omission is that, unlike the famous methodological remarks at the beginning of the *Ethics*, the *Politics* does not offer any defence of the inexactitude of the enquiry. There is only the odd passing remark: for example, that 'we ought not to require the same accuracy in theory as in the facts given by perception'.[27] This is despite the fact that the organization and doctrines of the work plainly imply that it is inexact in much the same way as the *Ethics*: its argument that different forms of political structure suit different circumstances, and its failure to provide an ideal constitution within its pages, both show that the enquiry aims merely at 'making generalizations on the basis of generalizations' in order 'to demonstrate the truth sketchily and in outline'.[28] If this should be thought to be making too much of the omission—because, for example, there may be some equally plausible explanation that requires no reference to the *Ethics*—it must be said that the onus here is on the dissenter. For that famous passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is explicitly concerned not, as seems commonly supposed, with the science or craft of ethics, but with the master-craft: that is, with the science of politics. So the *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with an important methodological discussion about the nature of the science of politics, in the process failing to draw any clear distinction between ethical and political science—while the *Politics* itself almost entirely lacks any such methodological discussion. If this is not carelessness it is evidence that the two works are indeed two parts of a single whole. I conclude, then, that Aristotle's practical philosophy is a unity, and that the enquiry into the good for man in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not self-sufficient, but finds its completion in the *Politics*.

The conclusion is bad news for modern virtue ethics. At least, it is so in so far as it denies virtue ethicists' their patron saint. Aristotle does not argue, or even suppose, that we should live according to virtues rather than rules or obligations, nor that focus on the character of agents can replace, or avoid, reference to acting rightly or wrongly. Aristotle's ethics—in our sense of the term—is his answer

[27] *Politics* VII (1328a20–1).
[28] *EN* I.3 (1094b).

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to the question 'How should we live?' That answer is that we should indeed develop in ourselves the virtues, but not because therein lies the whole of living well. Rather, to live well also requires that we live according to laws, and that the best life is that in which, with others, we make and also subordinate ourselves to laws, and so fulfil our nature as political beings.

But (it might be objected) isn't the issue being fudged? Isn't the point rather that, in his *Ethics*—and therefore in *his* sense of the word—Aristotle presents us with an account that entirely avoids appeal to obligations, the rightness of acts, etc? To address this complaint, we need to ask: an account *of what*? If we answer, *of happiness*, or *of the good for human beings*, we are back at the conclusions already reached, that the account of happiness or the good is the work of the two books together, not of the *Ethics* merely. If, alternatively, we answer, *of ethics in his sense*, then we do find ourselves able to clear up some of the confusion, but not in any way that changes the conclusions reached. For 'ethics' in his sense of the term, the sense embodied in the title of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and of the related peripatetic texts,[29] simply means *concerning character*. So it is unsurprising, but also quite beside the point, that the central books of his *Ethics* should be an account of the excellences of character. What it is not is a complete answer to the question of the good for human beings, of the happy or flourishing life. So it just is not true that, in Aristotle's sense of 'ethics', any of his works called *Ethics* provide us with an account of the good life in terms of the development of the virtues of character. They do not. They therefore do not provide—in *our* sense of the term—an ethic of virtues. In this sense, then, neither the *Nicomachean Ethics*, nor any of the other volumes of peripatetic *Ethics*, present a theory of 'Aristotelian ethics'—that is, of Aristotle's ethics as understood by modern virtue ethics.

A second, quite distinct, reason for thinking that the modern virtue ethics appropriation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is misguided is that it is committed to a selective reading of the work. In the first place, it ignores that virtue of character which is, for Aristotle, the most important of all: justice. True, it is aware of the lack, and some promises have been made to address it.[30] But promises they seem to remain, for the latest and most thorough attempt to provide a

[29] I mean by this term to include all the other works attributed either to Aristotle or to his school, i.e. the *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Magna Moralia*, and the *Virtues and Vices*. The point is that the argument is not restricted in application to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[30] See Crisp and Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, Introduction, 24–5.

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worked-out ethics of virtue begins by regretting that it offers no account of justice, and so no progress towards a 'politics of virtue'.[31] This may not be an accident. For, at least in its bolder versions, of promising an ethical viewpoint which is an alternative to (and not merely an augmentation of) law conceptions of ethics, it is not clear how justice can be included. This is because justice is precisely the virtue concerned with law and legality: if something falls within the purview of justice, then it falls within the scope of law, actually or potentially. In the case of Aristotle's *Ethics*, this is explicit: 'the just', he says, 'is the lawful and the fair, and the unjust is the lawless and the unfair'.[32] So Aristotle's account of the virtues of character cannot be employed to support an ethic of virtues in the bolder sense of an alternative to a law conception.

Moreover, it is even inconceivable that one could set aside Aristotle's account of justice and yet claim that one was developing an ethic of virtues in his *spirit*, if not his letter. For it is hard indeed to see how one could jettison the virtue Aristotle describes as 'complete virtue in the fullest sense, because it is the exercise of complete virtue',[33] and still claim to be working in an Aristotelian spirit. Since, for Aristotle, justice is lawfulness, since law 'demands actions in accordance with the other virtues, and forbids those in accordance with the vices',[34] and since justice is the exercise of complete virtue, the Aristotelian account of the virtues of character provides no foundation for an ethics of virtue in the bold modern sense.

One way of resisting this conclusion might seem open. The virtue of justice on which the argument has turned is acknowledged by Aristotle to be only one of two senses of the term. In the sense discussed, justice is 'complete virtue' because it is 'universal', and identical to 'virtue as a whole'; but there is another sense for which this is not true:

> Clearly ... besides universal justice, there is another form of injustice—particular injustice; it has the same name, because its definition falls under the same genus, both being effective in relation to somebody else. But whereas the one is concerned with honour or money or security—or that which includes all of these, if we had a name for it—and is motivated by the pleasure that

[31] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 5–7.

[32] *EN* V.1 (1129a–b).

[33] *EN* V.1 (1129b).

[34] *EN* V.1 (1129b).

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> results from gain, the other is concerned with all the things with which the good person is concerned.[35]

This opens up a space for resisting the conclusion reached above. It does so because, if there are two senses of justice, one universal and one particular, then it can plausibly be thought that the former rides on the back of the latter, by being a generalization of the latter. So, it could be argued, justice in the universal is only conceived as lawfulness because justice in the particular is so conceived; but if a virtue ethic can give an account of the virtue of particular justice without equating it with lawfulness, then there will be no compelling reason to think of universal justice as lawfulness either.[36]

This objection is sound in principle. The question is whether it can be given any cash value. Is it at all convincing to think that an account of particular justice can be given in terms of character *rather than* rules governing interactions involving possessions and suchlike? Is not the opposite the case? That is, is it not far more convincing to think of the possession of the virtue of justice simply as a shorthand way of referring to someone's proven tendencies to act as justice requires: by keeping their promises, paying their debts, returning what they have borrowed, and so on? If this is so, then the possession of the virtue is distinct from the doing of any just act, but the nature of the virtue is simply the character trait revealed by the doing of just acts. And, since the just acts themselves are purely a matter of conformity to accepted rules of justice, no divide between virtues and laws has been effected. The virtue of particular justice seems eminently to be a matter of lawfulness.

Aristotle agrees. It is no accident that his discussion of justice in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has a quasi-mathematical air, with all its talk of proportions and ratios. This is his recognition that justice *is* describable in terms of rules of interaction between different parties. Possession of the virtue of justice is not an alternative to acting in accordance with such rules, but the settled disposition to observe them when they are clear, or to discover them when they are not.

[35] *EN* V.2 (1130b).

[36] Note that this argument is equivalent to arguing against the idea of natural law ethics. This is because the idea of universal justice is the idea of natural law, as Aristotle himself makes clear: 'As regards what is politically just, one part is natural, the other legal. What is natural is what has the same force everywhere and does not depend on people's thinking. What is legal is what originally makes no difference whether it takes one form or another, but does matter when people have adopted it.' *EN* V.7 (1134b).

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Justice is lawfulness: in the particular no less than in the universal, and therefore (given our assumption) in the universal. So we are returned to the above conclusion: since, for Aristotle, universal justice is lawfulness, and since it is complete virtue, the account of the virtues of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides no rationale for modern 'virtue ethics'.

There is, however, a much deeper problem confronting the attempt to construct an ethic from the virtues of character, at least for any such attempts that invoke the spirit of Aristotle. It is that the virtues of character are the virtues of the *non-rational* part of the soul, and therefore the virtues of that part properly directed by reason. This meant, for Plato, that the thought that the best life consisted in the cultivation of the virtues of character could not be taken seriously.[37] But for Aristotle no less than for Plato, the soul has a hierarchical structure, and the living of the best life requires that the best or highest element in the soul is in control.[38] So, despite some obvious differences of orientation and emphasis, for Aristotle no less than for Plato it is quite inconceivable to suppose one can live the best life by relying simply on the virtues of character.[39] These virtues find their proper place in living well only when

[37] See *Phaedo* 82a–d, where Socrates discusses the different fates of different souls after death. The gluttonous, he claims, will come back as 'donkeys and other perverse animals', the unjust as 'wolves and hawks and kites'. He then adds: 'I suppose that the happiest people, and those who reach the best destination, are the ones who have cultivated the goodness of an ordinary citizen, so-called "temperance" and "justice", which is acquired by habit and practice, without the help of philosophy and reason.' However, he immediately goes on to explain that he means that human souls who live thus 'will probably pass into some other kind of social and disciplined creature like bees, wasps and ants; or even back into the human race again, becoming decent citizens ... But no soul which has not practised philosophy, and is not absolutely pure when it leaves the body, may attain to the divine nature; that is only for the lover of learning ... those who care about their souls ... believe that it is wrong to oppose philosophy with her offer of liberation and purification, so they turn and follow her wherever she leads.' Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993).

[38] See e.g. *EN* I.13 (1102a–1103a). The importance of reason's role is emphasized in Richard Sorabji, 'Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 201–19.

[39] See e.g. *EN* VI.2 (1139a), where thought and character are distinguished as separate components of rational choice, on which living well depends.

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directed by the distinctively *intellectual* virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). The non-rational elements of the soul can—and, indeed, should—be cultivated by the non-rational process of habituation; but they must be *directed* by practical wisdom.[40]

I suggest, then, that it is the failure fully to appreciate that the division of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—into virtues of character and intellectual virtues—is a division into subordinate and superior virtues, reflecting the hierarchy of the Aristotelian soul—that explains the misappropriation of Aristotle's *Ethics* by the modern virtue ethicists. So it will be an aid to more accurate interpretation of Aristotle to understand his account of the soul—and therefore of its proper ordering—and to see how this shapes his account of the virtues and of living well.

Aristotle's account of the soul's hierarchy is somewhat different from Plato's. However, it is less different than might at first appear, and so light is shed on Aristotle's account if we begin with Plato.[41] Plato argues, in the *Republic*, that the soul has three distinct parts. These parts are reason, spirit (*thumos*) and appetite, and are distinct because each is characterized by a distinct species of desire: for, respectively, the true, the honourable, and the pleasurable. They are genuinely distinct because the desires characteristic of each can come into direct conflict, such that we can simultaneously be attracted to and repelled by the very same object.[42] The *Timaeus* gives each a distinct location within the body: reason in the head, spirit in the chest (in particular, in the heart), and appetite in the abdomen.[43]

Of these elements, the lowest, appetite, is most readily explained. It is the craving for bodily pleasures: primarily for food and sex. The highest, reason, is to be understood in terms of the desire for knowledge and truth. So it is not only calculative abilities, but also

[40] Otherwise their exercise will be, with respect to the good, no more than a hit-or-miss-affair as the example of children shows. *EN* VI.13 (1144b).

[41] For a thorough defence of this connection, see John M. Cooper, 'Reason, Moral Virtue, and Moral Value', in Michael Frede and Gisela Striker (ed.), *Rationality in Greek Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 81–114; reprinted in Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 253–80.

[42] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 434e–441c.

[43] Plato, *Timaeus*, in T*imaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 69–73.

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the concern for knowledge and for whatever is related to knowledge. If love is—as Plato believes it is—a concern for knowledge of the beloved, then love belongs to the rational part of the soul.[44] The middle element of Plato's hierarchy, *thumos* or spirit, is perhaps the least familiar to the modern eye, but it falls into place when viewed against the background of Greek culture. It is, as we might now say, an element of 'folk psychology': the quality of character supposed, in the wider Greek culture, to be possessed by great men, such that its possession explained their greatness. This is why, as any reader of the *Republic* quickly discovers, it is a quality the possession of which is revealed above all by the expression of anger or indignation. It is, at bottom, *ambition*, and so the explanation for energetic action in pursuit of significant goals, and for the free expression of those emotions—such as anger—that reflect the frustration of those pursuits.

Thus the rage of Achilles, which brought such devastation upon his allies, is a mark of his greatness: no ordinary man could have possessed such capacity for anger, nor wrought such havoc through its expressions.[45] For the same reason, it is anger that is the engine of fate in many of the tragedies. To take just two examples: it is because mastered by anger that Medea murders her children,[46] and because overcome by it on the highway that Oedipus kills his father.[47] Only the great are capable of such destructive anger, so the pivotal role of anger in the tragedies can serve as the proof of Aristotle's observation, in the *Poetics*, that the mark of tragedy is its concern with the great.[48]

For our purposes, the important point is that, by subordinating *thumos* to reason in his account of the soul, Plato rejects, or heavily revises, the traditional Greek ideal of the great man. The problem is that, being driven by ambition to pursue honour, he must come into conflict with others similarly driven, and so bring havoc on those who depend on him. So, in place of this ideal Plato presents a model of a soul which functions harmoniously because the excesses

[44] Plato, *Republic*, 402d–403c.

[45] Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I. 1–5.

[46] Euripides, *Medea*, 1078–80; in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (ed.), *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), III, 100.

[47] Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 806ff; *The Complete Greek Tragedies,* II, 46.

[48] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), 1448b–1449b.

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of ambition, and also the excesses of pleasure to which the former can give rise, are kept within their proper bounds by the rule of reason. This is not the extirpation of great-souled ambition, but its tempering. In the *Republic*, spirit is to assist reason in the government of the appetites;[49] and it is readily able to do this because, as the allegory of the charioteer and the two horses in the *Phaedrus* shows, spirit is naturally akin to reason, and readily lends itself to reason's rule: it 'needs no whip'.[50] The soul is thus properly ordered when, instead of itself ruling, spirit assists reason in the rule over the appetites. This proper order is, however, rarely delivered by nature. So education is necessary, to strengthen reason and to temper the spirit, so that insatiable appetite is properly controlled:

> concord between them is effected ... by a combination of intellectual and physical training, which tunes up the reason by a training in rational argument and higher studies, and tones down and soothes the element of 'spirit' by harmony and rhythm ... When these two elements have been so brought up ... they must be put in charge of appetite ... for otherwise it will get too large and strong to mind its own business and will try to subject and control the other elements, which it has no right to do, and so wreck the life of all of them.[51]

Through the education of the mind and the training of the spirited part, then, the three parts of the soul find their proper ordering: reason restrains the inclination to excess of the ambitious, active, spirited part, and the two together control insatiable appetite, which left ungoverned would ruin the whole. The result is life lived well, with all the parts functioning together harmoniously.

Aristotle's picture is strikingly similar. He similarly conceives of the soul as a hierarchy, and of the good life in terms of the harmonious functioning of the whole. What he does not do is spell it all out in the pages of the *Ethics*. It is, however, implicit throughout, and in some parts comes right to the surface. To see its influence clearly, it is necessary to turn to his official account of the soul. *De Anima* divides the soul into three parts—or, what is the same thing, it divides souls into three distinct kinds, such that different organisms possess one, two or three, depending on their capabilities. The first is the nutritive soul, possessed by all living things. The second is the perceptual soul, possessed, along with the nutritive soul, by

[49] Plato, *Republic*, 441e–442b.

[50] Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 253–4.

[51] Plato, *Republic*, 441e–442b.

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all animals. The third is the intellectual soul, and is possessed, along with the other two, by human beings. So Aristotle, like Plato, divides the human being into three. Clearly, however, the two accounts are different—and not merely in the obvious respect that Aristotle's first division is not (in our sense) psychological, but biological. The principle of division is also somewhat different: for Plato it is different forms of desire, whereas for Aristotle it is different sources of movement. But this is really only a difference in generality, reflecting Aristotle's determination to offer a comprehensive scheme for all living things: desire is a source of movement, and, for the human being, *the* source of movement. So Aristotle's objection to Plato's division—that it is 'a patent absurdity' to provide a tripartite division such that there is 'desire in all three parts of the soul'[52]—is not a complaint from which his own account is entirely insulated. His separation of the intellectual from the perceptual, although not, in contrast to Plato, grounded in differences between kinds of desire, nevertheless does divide desires into distinct groups.

Not that this is the end of Aristotle's divisions: he further divides both the perceptual and the intellectual into two, the active and the passive. The division of the intellectual part is discussed only briefly, but enough is said to make plain that active intellect is the highest part of ourselves—'for in all cases that which acts is superior to that which is affected'—and is, indeed, capable of separate existence—it is 'separate, unaffected and unmixed'.[53] Passive intellect is, by contrast, mortal—'the intellect that is affected is perishable'—and so, presumably, 'mixed', inseparable from the body. It must be so because its passivity—its capacity to be affected—is precisely its receptiveness to perceptual (bodily) stimuli. Passive intellect is, then, enmeshed with the body and its doings.

The importance, for our purposes, of this account of the

[52] Aristotle, *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), III.9 (432b). The Oxford and Loeb translations say 'appetite' rather than 'desire'—see *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, *Complete Works*, and *On the Soul*, *Parva Naturalia*, *On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936)—but 'desire' is preferable, since the Greek term—*orexis*—is very broad, embracing both the perceptual (non-rational) and rational spheres, and so including in its scope *epithumia* (appetite), *thumos* (spirited desire), and *boulesis* (rational wish). Aristotle himself elsewhere explains it in appropriately broad terms, as characterized simply by 'pursuit and avoidance' (*EN* VI.2 1139a).

[53] *De Anima* (*On the Soul*), III.5 (430a).

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different parts of the intellect is that they seem to map onto the division of reason into theoretical and practical in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Theoretical intellect seems equivalent to active intellect, first because it does not rely on the passive power of sense-perception, and secondly because its activity is contemplation, the most godlike—and therefore 'unmixed'—activity of which we are capable; whereas practical wisdom, like passive intellect, is 'mixed' with the concerns of the body, and, more generally with the changeable world of perceptible objects. Thus the 'two sub-parts with reason' are there described in terms of their different objects: 'those things whose first principles cannot be otherwise, and ... those things whose first principles can be otherwise'.[54] The latter group is then divided into the productive and the practical—that is, into the domains of *techne* and of *phronesis*[55]—and it is explicitly affirmed of the latter that, because it is concerned with 'what is done', it is concerned with 'the object of perception, not of scientific knowledge'.[56] So practical wisdom, like passive intellect, is 'mixed': it is rational because it is (passively) receptive to pure reason,[57] and it is practical because it governs the perceptual soul and its world of change. In the words, of the *Magna Moralia*, it is a 'steward or housekeeper' for pure reason, freeing it from the distractions of caring for daily necessities by 'restraining and disciplining the passions of the soul'.[58]

The division of the perceptual into active and passive parts underlies much of the discussion of the virtues of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and, strikingly, it brings Aristotle's account of the non-rational part of the human soul back to Plato. The two accounts are not identical, but it is clear that active perceptual soul corresponds closely with Platonic spirit, and the passive part with Platonic appetite. This is shown by Aristotle's recurring discussion of the roles of feeling and action—that is, of passivity and activity

[54] *EN* VI.1 (1139a).
[55] *EN* VI.4 (1140a).
[56] *EN* VI.8 (1142a).
[57] *EN* I.13 (1102b): 'the element with reason will also have two parts, one, in the strict sense, possessing it in itself, the other ready to listen to reason as one is ready to listen to the reason of one's father'.
[58] *Magna Moralia* I.xxxiv (1198b), in Aristotle, *Metaphysics X–XIV*, *Oeconomica, Magna Moralia*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935). Cf. *EN* VI.2 (1139a): rational choice (which belongs to practical wisdom) 'involves not only intellect and thought, but a state of character; for acting well and its contrary require thought and character'.

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in the perceptual soul—and of the virtues characteristic of these two parts of the soul, temperance and courage. Temperance is described as a mean with respect to pleasure, specifically, to those pleasures thought of as 'bodily' because they are linked to the appetites. Thus Aristotle observes that the intemperate are not those who enjoy the smell of fruit or flowers, but those who enjoy 'the smells of perfumes and cooked dishes ... because they remind them of the objects of their appetites', that is, of indulgence with respect to sex and food. The form of sense-perception to which the intemperate are in thrall is, above all, the sense of touch, the most brutish of the senses. It is, then, as appetitive beings that we are prone to intemperance.[59] Temperance is therefore the virtue which preserves practical wisdom from ruination by pleasure.[60] Courage, in contrast, is a mean with respect to spirited action, that is, of action which confronts danger for the sake of nobility and honour. It is concerned with feelings of fear and confidence, but not all fears are the concern of the courageous person, only those concerned with what 'it is right and noble to fear, and shameful not to fear'.[61] That is, the courageous person is the person who finds the mean with respect to what is properly feared because a genuine threat to nobility and honour—the concerns of the spirited part of the soul.[62]

Keeping this division in mind also removes much of the indeterminacy which might be thought to vitiate the doctrine of the mean. If virtue lies in a mean between excess and deficiency, it is reasonable to ask: excess or deficiency *in what respect*? This question is answered by bearing in mind the characteristic ends, or desires, of these different parts of the soul: temperance is a mean between excess and deficiency in the domain of appetite; courage is a mean between excess and deficiency in the domain of spirit. Practical reason determines wherein that mean lies, but the *interval* along which

[59] *EN* III.10 (1115a).
[60] *EN* VI.5 (1140b).
[61] *EN* III.6 (1117b–1118b).
[62] The point is reinforced by some observations in Christopher Cordner, *Ethical Encounter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). Cordner follows J. O. Urmson in rendering Aristotle's *andreia* as 'valour' rather than 'courage'. His point is that valour, like Aristotle's *andreia*, 'centrally involves an active physical confrontation of the world, and an attempt to subdue what is encountered. And this context of public activity is then one which is fit for that realization of self-as-hero which invites and properly receives public acknowledgement and celebration' (29). This is just what one would expect of the virtue most fully characteristic of ambitious, self-assertive, honour-loving—in a word, Homeric—*thumos*.

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it lies between excess and deficiency is settled by the level of the soul—and thus with respect to a particular cluster of desires or psychological tendencies—to which each kind of virtue belongs. This is why natural endowments of the right kind may themselves be describable, if roughly, as virtues—they naturally incline their possessors in the direction of virtue, even though such 'natural virtue' becomes 'real virtue' only through the exercise of practical wisdom.[63]

With these considerations in mind, we can also see why greatness of soul—the virtue that is 'concerned with honour on a grand scale'[64]—is a virtue, and even why it is 'a sort of crown of the virtues'.[65] Aristotle has frequently been attacked for his views at this point, but, whether deservedly or not, *why* he says this becomes clear once it is seen that he is here considering virtue with respect to those who are most richly endowed with the active part of the perceptual soul—that is, with spirited *thumos*. The virtue of being great-souled is thus the crown of the virtues of *character*, because it is the virtue appropriate to the possession of greatness of spirit. So Aristotle's account of this virtue has to be seen as his account of the practically wise great man, of the virtue appropriate to an Oedipus or an Achilles, or, rather more relevantly, a Pericles. *Megalopsuchos* is *megalothumos*. Similarly, the account of universal justice as 'complete virtue' is illuminated against this background, precisely because justice is *not* a virtue restricted in application to one level of the soul. It is the virtue concerned with proper restraint with respect to others—with avoiding *pleonexia*, or greed, thereby achieving a fair division of things[66]—and so depends on self-control with respect to *all* one's appetites or passions (spirited desires). It thus just *is* virtue 'in relation to others', and so is, as Aristotle emphasizes, 'a difficult thing to do'.[67]

The virtues of character are all means between excess and deficiency. They are so because they concern the proper management of impulses and other non-rational desires, all of which are themselves capable of excess or deficiency. The task of managing these non-rational elements belongs to reason: as Aristotle says, 'the mean is as correct reason prescribes'.[68] The task of Book VI is to determine what part of reason it is that does the prescribing. He has already

[63] *EN* VI.13 (1144b).
[64] *EN* IV.3 (1125a).
[65] *EN* IV.3 (1124a).
[66] *EN* V.1 (1129a–b), V.4 (1132b).
[67] *EN* V.1 (1130a).
[68] *EN* VI.1 (1138b).

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argued, in Book III, that praiseworthy actions depend on rational choice, so another way to describe his task is that of determining what rational choice depends on. His answer is that rational choice depends on 'desire, and goal-directed reason'. It is therefore 'either desire-related intellect [*orektikos nous*] or thought-related desire [*orexis dianoetike*], and such a first principle is a human being'.[69]

This is a striking passage. It is not entirely clear at this point whether Aristotle is presenting us with two alternatives, or with two ways of saying the same thing. Perhaps it does not matter. What does matter is that he is here rejecting the thought that a human being, and therefore also a human life, can be adequately grasped in purely intellectual terms.[70] He is, in other words, rejecting the possibility that pure or theoretical reason is the reason that prescribes wherein the mean lies, the reason that prescribes for human life. Wisdom (*sophia*), although (or because) 'the most precise of the sciences', and 'scientific knowledge of the most honourable matters', is disqualified because it is not *practically* wise, has no concern with mere human affairs:

> This is why people say that Anaxagoras, Thales, and people like them are wise, but not practically wise, when they are seen to be ignorant of what is in their own interest; and that their knowledge is extraordinary, abstruse, wonderful, godlike, but useless, because it is not human goods they are looking for.[71]

The point is, we must set our sights lower, to take in properly the concerns of a being which is not, as we might put it, perfectly or completely rational, but only incompletely so. The reason that prescribes for such beings is desire-related reason: that is, practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom is 'concerned with human affairs, namely, with what we can deliberate about'; it concerns what can be otherwise, and aims 'at the best of the goods for a human being, that are achievable in action'; it is able to do this because, unlike pure

[69] *EN* VI.2 (1139b).

[70] This is to hold that, in this passage, *orexis* must be understood to exclude the forms of desire characteristic of *pure* reason—that is, of *episteme*, *nous*, and *sophia*. Perhaps this is the point of Aristotle's claim that it is 'absurd' to attribute *orexis* to all parts of the soul (see above, n52 and text). The problem with holding this, though, is that it is at odds with the famous opening sentence of the *Metaphysics*—'*Pantes anthropoi tou eidenai oregontai phusei*' (Aristotle, M*etaphysics I-IX*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), I.1 (980a22))—since desire (*orexis*) there plainly is meant to include pure reason no less than perception and practical reason.

[71] *EN* VI.7 (1141b).

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reason, it is not 'concerned only with universals', but also—and especially—with particulars, since 'action is concerned with particulars'. Nevertheless, one must not mistake knowledge of particulars for the whole of practical wisdom, because 'there must be some master science'.[72]

That 'master science' we have already met under a different name: political science (*he politike*). So Aristotle turns to determine whether, or to what extent, practical wisdom and political science are the same thing. They are, he says, 'the same state, but their being is different'. It is not obvious what he means by this, and the different uses of the two terms seem mainly to indicate that no sharp distinction can be drawn between them. He observes that practical wisdom is thought more to concern the good of the individual than the household or city, political science the good of the city. But since, he adds, one's own good will presumably not exist without the management of a household and without a political system',[73] the moral does seem to be that practical wisdom and political science can be regarded as much the same thing. Practical wisdom is, then, the reason that prescribes for human life, that 'gives commands' about 'what should or should not be done'[74]—about what is the best way for an imperfectly rational being to order its life.

We are now in a position to take stock. Virtues of character lie in a mean; the mean itself is determined by practical wisdom. The intellectual virtues, practical wisdom included, do not lie in a mean. They are good in themselves, being different forms of rationality, and their possession is a good. The doctrine of the mean is therefore an indirect indication that the virtues of character arise from the application of reason to non-rational elements of human nature that cannot themselves discern and pursue what is good. Since they are non-rational, they will of themselves generate virtuous actions only incidentally, and virtuous characters not at all. So Aristotle concludes, as had Plato, that reason must rule in the soul. However, since what is to be ruled is not perfectly rational, but an amalgam of reason and desire, that rule cannot be by theoretical intellect, but only by practical wisdom. So Aristotle departs from Plato by offering a less intellectualized account of the reason that must rule.

There remains one further consequence of the fact that the being to be ruled is less than perfectly rational. It is as follows. Since the elements in need of rule are themselves non-rational, they cannot

[72] *EN* VI.7 (1141b).
[73] *EN* VI.8 (1142a).
[74] *EN* VI.10 (1143a).

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readily listen to reason. They cannot be taught, because teaching is an activity of reason, and reason—arguments—cannot by itself make people good.[75] This is the mistake of the masses:

> They take refuge in argument, thinking that they are being philosophers and that this is the way to become good. They are rather like patients who listen carefully to their doctors but do not do what they are told. Just as such treatment will not make the patients healthy in body, so being this kind of philosopher will not make the masses healthy in soul.[76]

How then is one to become good? That is, how are the non-rational elements in the soul to be made amenable to reason's rule?

Aristotle's answer is plain. The non-rational elements in the human being cannot simply be taught, but that does not mean that they are beyond education. Non-rational endowments can be modified for the better—through habituation. Even some animals can develop their natural powers in this way. Human beings, possessed of reason, can therefore adopt this method of education and direct it to a rationally-chosen good:

> Animals lead for the most part a life of nature, although in lesser particulars some are influenced by habit as well. Man has reason, in addition, and man only. For this reason nature, habit, reason, must be in harmony with one another; for they do not always agree; men do many things against habit and nature, if reason persuades them that they ought. We have already determined what natures are likely to be most easily moulded by the hands of the legislator. All else is the work of education; we learn some things by habit and some by instruction.[77]

It is possible in some cases, then, for reason to overcome nature and habit. But the reliable course is to develop natural endowments through habituation, and so make them more amenable to reason's rule. In this way, a practically wise system of education can develop habits which bring nature, habit and reason into harmony. Such an education system will begin with the needs of the body, but will develop the body and the soul according to the methods appropriate to each, and for the sake of the rationally-determined good:

> Now, in men reason and mind are the end towards which nature strives, so that the birth and training in custom of the citizens

[75] *EN* X.9 (1179b).
[76] *EN* II.4 (1105b).
[77] *Politics*, VII (1332b3–10).

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> ought to be ordered with a view to them. In the second place, as the soul and body are two, we see also that there are two parts of the soul, the rational and the irrational, and two corresponding states—reason and appetite. And as the body is prior in order of generation to the soul, so the irrational is prior to the rational ... For this reason, the care of the body ought to precede that of the soul, and the training of the appetitive part should follow: none the less our care of it must be for the sake of reason, and our care of the body for the sake of the soul.[78]

In this passage, Aristotle has ignored the distinction between the spirited and the appetitive in the non-rational soul, but the message is clear: the non-rational capacities must be developed independently of, and prior to, the specifically rational. This includes the various virtues of character. If we are to live and act well, we must become temperate, courageous, just, and so on. These are virtues, and so not merely our natural endowments. But they belong to the non-rational part, so cannot simply be taught. They must be developed through habituation:

> virtue of character is a result of habituation ... From this it is clear that none of the virtues of character arise in us by nature. For nothing natural can be made to behave differently by habituation ... virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but nature gives us the capacity to acquire them and completion comes through habituation ... So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions. What happens in cities bears this out as well, because legislators make the citizens good by habituating them, and this is what every legislator intends.[79]

We can now see why Aristotle emphasizes that education in the virtues—that is, the virtues of character—is a matter of habituation. It is because character belongs to the non-rational part of the soul that habituation is the appropriate method; and it is because it is through habituation that the non-rational part is brought to a settled state capable of listening to the rule of practical wisdom that habituation is necessary. (This is why virtues of character are praiseworthy, even though not part of rational virtue.[80]) Habituation in virtuous acts is thus not justified simply because this results in

[78] *Politics*, VII (1334b15–28).
[79] *EN* II.1 (1103a).
[80] *EN* I.13 (1103a).

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virtuous character—as modern virtue ethics commonly supposes—but because habituation is the means by which unruly nature is tamed, and the rule of reason thereby rendered possible.[81]

To sum up: Aristotle's enquiry into the good for human beings is an enquiry into the good of a being constituted by non-rational and rational components. Reason is the godlike element, and so it must rule. But the nature of what is to be ruled imposes two kinds of constraints on reason: one is that the form of reason appropriate to rule such a being cannot be theoretical reason, but goal-directed (desire-related) reason, practical wisdom (*phronesis*); the second is that the rule of reason must itself be imposed gradually and indirectly, the non-rational impulses in the soul needing to be settled and made amenable to rational rule through habituation. In this light Aristotle's concerns in the *Ethics* and the *Politics* all fall into place. The account of the virtues of character in the former is the explication of the nature of good order in the non-rational part of the soul; the accompanying accounts of deliberation and choice on the one hand, and weakness on the other, of supports and threats to that good order; the account of pleasure of a natural threat which can become a cultivated support. Practical wisdom is the means by which that order is maintained and directed to service of the good life.

Practical wisdom, is, moreover, the same as the master science of the political, and so its task includes the framing of laws and the making of political and judicial decisions for the organized community in which a rational political being must live. In this way the *Ethics* finds its completion in the *Politics*. That work affirms that the state is the end at which individuals and lesser human associations aim, because it is only when ruled according to law and justice that human life is complete. The rule of reason must become actual in systems of law. Moreover, the examination of systems of laws leads to the conclusion that the best—the practically wise—should rule, whereas natural slaves—those lacking a ruling element in their soul—should have no part in governing. So the *Politics* also affirms that good order is achieved when reason rules over the appetitive and unruly. The message of Aristotle's practical philosophy, as contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, is that the good life depends on harmonious functioning, and that this harmony is achieved when reason rules in both the individual soul and in the political order, and when the rational and non-rational elements co-exist in a proper order. Aristotle's view is, in other words, a revision of Plato's position in the *Republic*, and so the *Ethics* and the *Politics*

[81] Cf. *EN* I.4 (1095b).

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can together be thought of as Aristotle's *Republic*.[82] Moreover, Plato's *Republic* is best understood as being simultaneously an ethical as well as a political work, and the same is true of Aristotle's *Republic*. The moral is this: Aristotle's *Ethics* is not Aristotle's ethics; and Aristotle's ethics is not virtue ethics.

This conclusion does not, of course, rule out concern for the virtues, nor the seeking of inspiration from Aristotle. It is, however, to bring to the fore Aristotle's different starting-points, and different concerns. It is to deny that the bolder forms of modern virtue ethics are grounded in Aristotelian ethics. It is to recognize that the weaker forms of virtue ethics, which seek to augment obligation-centred morality with a richer psychology, are also at odds with the Aristotelian spirit: their concern that emotions have been undervalued is at odds with Aristotle's concern to *tame* the non-rational elements in the soul so that reason can rule harmoniously.[83] They are agreed, however, on one important point: that *hoi polloi* who 'take refuge in argument', and think that in this way they are 'being philosophers' and discovering 'the way to be good', are sorely misled.[84] Reason alone is helpless without the development of good character. It is necessary but not sufficient: 'we cannot be really good without practical wisdom, or practically wise without virtue of character'.[85] This is because a human being, although a rational

[82] In contrast to Plato, Aristotle sees the family as a natural institution intermediate between individual and state, so, strictly speaking, the *Oeconomica* should be added to complete Aristotle's *Republic*. The rule over the household is a form of monarchy, at least over the children and slaves, but a constitutional rule over the woman because what she lacks is authority rather than deliberative power: see *Politics* I (1259a37–1260b25); also III (1285b29–33). Since reason is the commanding element (*EN* III.3 (1113a), III.12 (1119b); *Politics* III (1287a15–33)), this presumably means that women are partly rational, partly not. They are therefore naturally suited to managing the everyday details of household life, but under the husband's overarching authority. The details are spelt out in *Oeconomica* III (if this is to be attributed to Aristotle's authorship). See *Metaphysics X–XIV*, *Oeconomica*, *Magna Moralia*, 323–5. So, as reason rules in the soul over the non-rational elements, the man rules in the household over all—wife, children and slaves—while the wife, being partly rational, shares in the rule, and is herself ruled constitutionally rather than royally. The state, being an association of rational rulers of these private domains, is then structured according to the degree of rationality of these rational beings.

[83] See e.g. *EN* III.12 (1119b).

[84] *EN* II.4 (1105b).

[85] E*N* VI.13 (1144b).

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being, is not *wholly* rational, but only imperfectly so; and so the proper harmony of the human soul depends on reason establishing the right relation with the non-rational elements.[86] Aristotle and the moderate form of virtue ethics are thus united against the *unqualified* appeal to reason so common amongst modern moral philosophers.[87]

Nevertheless, Aristotle and the modern champions of virtue are divided more deeply than they are united. This is especially the case for the bolder forms, of course, but weaker versions, in so far as they trade on the legitimacy conferred by their bolder cousin—in so far as they are worthy of the name 'virtue ethics'—are also more alien to Aristotle than tends to be noticed. This can be brought home by attending to a similarity made much of by the champions of modern virtue ethics: that for both Aristotle and modern virtue ethics, the standard of conduct is provided not by rules but by virtuous agents themselves. Aristotle himself says on a number of occasions, 'virtue and the good person seem to be the standard in each case',[88] and this theme virtue ethics has taken to its heart. Thus A. D. M. Walker observes, in a standard formulation, that 'for the virtue ethicist, an action is right ... if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances'.[89]

However, this shared theme marks a deep difference. For modern virtue ethics, the point is that virtuous traits *are* the standard from

[86] *EN* X.8 (1178a–b). The problem of the proper accommodation of the rational to the non-rational in the best *human* life is also the concern of Plato's *Philebus*, so it is possible to think of the *Ethics* as Aristotle's version of the *Philebus*. This resemblance is especially marked in Book X, where, as in the *Philebus*, the discussion moves from the claims of hedonism to the conclusion that, for a human being, the best life, practically speaking, is not the godlike life of pure contemplation but a life in which there is a mixture of rational and non-rational elements.

[87] Kant fits this picture less well than might be supposed, since for him the imperfection of human rationality was a datum. The best examples are to be found amongst the heroic varieties of contemporary practical ethics: see, for example, Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 1; and, in slightly weaker form, James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd edn. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1999), ch. 1.

[88] *EN* IX.4 (1166a).

[89] A. D. M. Walker, Review of Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18 (2001), 95. See also Crisp and Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, 3 (quoted more fully at the beginning of this paper): 'The notions of virtue ... are more basic than the notions at the heart of utilitarian or Kantian theory.'

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which our notions of rightness derive; that, for all (or some) of our judgments of value, the virtues are simply bedrock. This is not Aristotle's view. The reason why he affirms that 'virtue and the good person seem to be the standard' is because they are the standard *for us*, the imperfectly rational beings that we are. For Aristotle, but not for the modern virtue ethicist, the enquiry into the good for a human being is an *inexact* science, in which 'it is a mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits'.[90] In this way it is like medicine: both *aim* at the good, but not in a way that rules out error; for each, its function or characteristic activity (*ergon*) is distinct from its true end (*telos*). This is why the *Nicomachean Ethics* abounds with examples drawn from medicine; why it is concerned not to ignore the effects of fortune on human affairs;[91] and why the question of the human good is approached through a consideration of the human *ergon*.[92] It is also, of course, why the individual virtues of character (but not the intellectual virtues) are defined only as lying in a mean—that is, inexactly—and, moreover, in a mean relative *to us*.[93] It is why the *Politics* surveys different constitutions, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, but holds back from providing an ideal constitution.

The key to these features lies in human nature itself: human beings are a mixture of rational and non-rational—of godlike and material—elements, and this unavoidable materiality is *ipso facto* imperfection. Just as medicine, in dealing with the health of the material body, cannot hope for more precision than the (material) subject matter permits, so political science (and its subdiscipline, ethics), in dealing with the health of the *human* soul, cannot hope for more precision than the 'mixed' condition of human being allows. Like medicine, *he politike*, or political science, the enquiry into the good for a human being, is only a *stochastic techne*, and is so because its subject matter is not wholly godlike, but suffers the imperfections of materiality and non-rationality.[94] For Aristotle,

[90] *EN* I.3 (1094b).

[91] *EN* I.8 (1099a–b); cf. also the inclusion, in Book IV, of discussion of virtues dependent on fortune (e.g. on wealth).

[92] *EN* I.7 (1097b).

[93] *EN* II.6 (1106b–1107a).

[94] The account of a stochastic techne in these paragraphs derives from David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato's Understanding of Techne* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), ch. 1. The term originates in the *Philebus* (55e) where stochastic *technai* like music are distinguished from exact *technai* like building, but becomes a

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then, 'virtue and the good person seem to be the standard' not because this is to hit value bedrock, but because to be human is *itself* to 'miss the mark', to fall short of the ideal.[95] The good person is the best practical standard to be had, but not the best standard *simpliciter*. A human being does not *define* goodness, but *strives after* it; living well is *hard*.[96] For Aristotle, but not for modern virtue ethics, orientation in thinking requires recognizing that a human being is only an imperfectly rational being: a human being is not a god.[97]

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[95] Thus, for example, 'what is just is a human affair', *EN* V.9 (1137a).

[96] See e.g. *EN* IV.3 (1124a); V.9 (1137a).

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term of art (a technical term) only with Alexander of Aphrodisias: *Of Art and Wisdom*, 52–4. The concept originates in the Hippocratic authors, who argue that medicine is indeed a *techne*, even if an inexact one—i.e. one in which, even when the proper regimen is followed, the patient sometimes dies. See 'The Tradition of Medicine' [On Ancient Medicine] and 'The Science of Medicine' [On *Techne*], in *Hippocratic Writings*, ed. G. E. R. Lloyd (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), 70–86, 139–47. Roochnik's argument is that Plato rejects the *techne* analogy altogether; my point is that the methodological remarks, and the frequent appeal to medical examples, shows Aristotle to accept that the question of the good life for a human being is a stochastic *techne*. The connection between materiality and imperfection, on which the idea of a stochastic *techne* is based, is central to C. D. C. Reeve's interpretation of Aristotle in his *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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